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ABSTRACT

Self-concept is an important element in the growth and developmental process for individual human beings. Adult learners in institutional programs need assistance in probing their inner selves to be able to move ahead in their lives. David Kolb's work with the experiential learning model is especially appropriate in dealing with adult learners. In addition to providing a framework for conceptualizing individual differences in learning styles and social adaptation, the model suggests more normative directions for human growth and development. The particularity of one's cultural/personal history is pivotal in the emerging self-concept. One must look objectively at one's history, relate it, and calibrate it to the present experiences with which one is struggling in the effort to gain self-knowledge. Armed with an accurate self-concept, the individual can find self-actualization. As the individual moves through life, he/she must face various role demands. Each person has some center of ultimate concern that defines the center of self and gives the organizing principle for all the various "callings." The task of bringing these diverse inner elements or roles into a cooperative, contributive relationship with each other is a major task of self-concept identification for every adult. (YLB)

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THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-CONCEPT FOR
THE ADULT LEARNER

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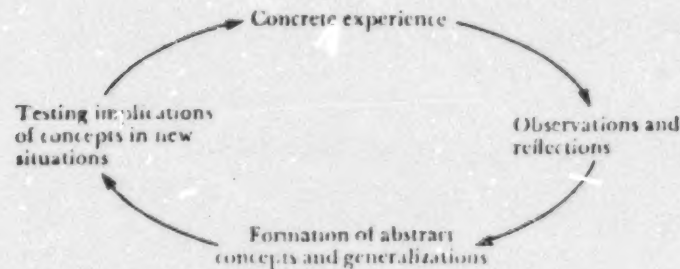
The Importance of Self-Concept For the Adult Learner

Self-concept may well be the key to success in education if not in all of life. From Socrates (know thyself) to Abraham Maslow (self-actualization) and Malcolm Knowles (self-directed learner), what one believes about oneself is inextricably bound up with the direction one's life takes. What it means to be a person, a human being, and, in particular, what it means to be the person I am, is ontologically "where it's at," (to use the vernacular) for everyone. This is particularly true at points of passage and transition in the unfolding of one's life. Adults returning to learning in our institutional programs need assistance in probing their inner selves in the effort to move ahead in their lives. As Nevitt Sanford (1962, p. 28) has observed:

Anything that increases the likelihood that the sense of self will be based on personal experience rather than on outside judgment favors the stabilization of ego identity. Being placed in social roles that require new responses, having to make decisions concerning roles one is going to take, learning from experience that some roles are suited and others not suited to one's interest and needs--any situation that brings awareness to one's real preferences and inner continuities helps to establish sound ego identity.

David Kolb's work with the experiential learning model is especially appropriate in dealing with adult learners. It conceptualizes the learning process in such a way that differences in individual learning styles and corresponding learning environments can be identified. It emphasizes the role that experience plays in the learning process, an emphasis that differentiates this approach from other cognitive theories of the learning process.

Figure 1. The Experiential Learning Model



The core of the model is a simple description of the learning cycle--of how experience is translated into concepts, which, in turn, are used as guides in the choice of new experiences. Learning is conceived as a four-stage cycle (see Figure 1). Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. An individual uses these observations to build an idea, generalizations, or "theory" from which new implications for action can be deduced. These implications or hypotheses then serve as guides in acting to create new experiences. (Kolb, 1981, p. 235)

Kolb has developed a brief self-descriptive inventory called the Learning Style Inventory to measure differences in preferred learning styles by which self-analysis can easily be accomplished. In addition to providing a framework for conceptualizing individual differences in learning styles and social adaptation, the experiential learning model suggests more normative directions for human growth and development. Experiential learning is not a molecular educational concept but rather a molar concept describing the central process of human adaptation to the social and physical environment.

Like Jungian theory (Jung, 1923), it is a holistic concept that seeks to describe the emergence of basic life orientations as a function of dialectical tensions between basic modes of relating to the world. As such, it encompasses other more limited adaptive concepts, such as creativity, problem-solving, decision making, and attitude change, which focus heavily on one or another of the basic aspects of adaptation. (Kolb, p. 248)

From this broader perspective, learning and self-evaluation become central life tasks.

Particularity of Cultural/Personal History

Every person then who comes into the world has a cultural and personal history. Each of us by empirical circumstances is born into a different situation in life from any other person although the broader commonalities of geography, family name, or race may be roughly the same.

For that matter, no two children are born into the same family, exactly. The first child is the only child until the second is born. The second child is born to parents who have experience with a first child until the second one is born. The second child is born to parents who have experience with a first child by which to judge their patterns of rearing the second one. They are somewhat different persons now. This particularity in personal and cultural history sets persons on the road to a unique history and individuality of their own. But the interpretation, the meaning, and the ordering which each person decides to give to these events or personal history focus the identity in a way that is particular to that individual.

Personal experience again is pivotal in the emerging self-concept. Jane Loevinger (1970) traces her use of the term ego development to Adler's concept of "style of life," which at various times he equated with self or ego, unity of personality, one's method of facing problems, and one's whole attitude toward life. Harry Stack Sullivan called this the self-system and advanced a

theory of selective inattention to explain why an individual's ego stage is stable, or changes only slowly. According to this theory, a person tends to pay attention only to what is in accord with that person's existing perceptual framework. Discordant observations cause anxiety and give rise to the ego's major task: searching for coherent meanings in experience.

The important point here is that one's self-concept is a pervasive, self-reinforcing frame of reference for experiencing.

The Meaning and Ordering of the Self-Concept

The self-conscious assignment of meaning to one's existence brings, then, a certain focus and direction to one's identity which shapes the person's self-concept. The focus itself implies a certain direction and ongoingness which raises the existential question of vocation or calling in the person's life. The self both lays hold of and is laid hold of, by a Stronger Purpose, the Wholly Other, a Cause to which one's life is dedicated. This higher calling becomes then the "vocation" around which the self-concept is formed. It gives meaning and order to one's life. It brings integration to self at critical times when the forces of disintegration are most active.

It may appear at times that the individual is anesthetized against self-knowledge. We all tend to block out reflective thinking by worrying, comparing, wanting, and calculating. (Deborah Hanson-Zaiko, 1979). This is what Rita Weathersby calls the Conformist Stage in ego development. It is characterized by a concern with belonging, guilt over breaking the rules, adherence to external rules.

If the self-concept is to be seen in developmental terms, one should be progressing from the Conformist Stage through the Conscientious Stage, the Autonomous Stage, the Individualistic Stage before reaching the Integrated Stage. At the highest stage of ego development, the person would be able to unite and integrate ideas that appear as incompatible opposites at lower stages. One would have a high tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. Self-fulfillment would become an important concern, partly supplanting the importance of achievement and conformity at earlier stages. Maslow's (1971) description of self-actualizing persons is an approximation of these higher stages.

The human being is not a simple integer, but rather a complex system of competing structures. A larger frame of orientation and center of devotion must provide the inner patterning of the role demands faced by each person. Otherwise, the human being is not a defined self at all but a cacophony of warring voices.

The energetic field of the self is not a static existence. Each time a new conflict arises upon the permeation of new experience, change and growth or change and retreat take place. This implies that every self faces the task of determining what is durable and what is not, what among the values of life can be trusted faithfully and what cannot. The further definition of any person's identity comes as that person decisively focuses upon the destiny-kinships of life. This means the explicit definitions of the individual's power to make a commitment and to trust. Decision making is forced upon each as our life unfolds. What direction will my life take now is a question everyone of us must face fairly frequently. These decisions begin to fall into a

pattern that furnishes the focus and contour of our selfhood.

This set of decisions represents what we have valued and devalued, accepted and rejected, affirmed and denied. As such, these values furnish structure, ontologically rooted to the self-concept of a person. They become the permanent yet permeable stuff of which the person is made. They are permanent in that the individual has continuity with all that he or she has ever done and is a part of all he or she has met. They are permeable in that the ongoing processes of life permeate the self as it is until it becomes something different and new every day.

The Self as Center of Ultimate Concern

The final challenge in the focusing of self-concept is the adequacy of the center of ultimate concern mentioned above. The loyalty center of the self provides a magnetic center for the self.

At the same time it furnishes a principle of organization for the inner variety of systems of the identity of the human being. For many, this center of all being, the organizing principle of life, is the Deity. It depends on one's orientation. Eric Fromm, for example, speaks negatively of the materialism of the marketing orientation. He extols, on the other hand, the humanistic orientation. Whatever the individual personal orientation, this selfchosen center of existence becomes an ultimate concern for that person. As such it has power--power to confer integration and hope or disintegration and disillusionment upon the self. From this no self is exempt.

However, this integration which such a center of loyalty and commitment confers upon the self is not a single-dimensional integration. The self is not only one, but it is diverse and multidifferentiated. Lewin reminds us that it is open to question as to whether the self is a "functional part region within (a) psychic totality."

The inner diversity of the self, particularly the productive and creative self impresses itself upon empirical observations both in the educational and the therapeutic contexts of life.

Summary

Self-concept is all important in the growth and development process for individual human beings. If one is to be able to move ahead with one's life in a meaningful, purposeful manner, if one is to feel in control of the direction and patterning of life, there must be present the opportunity for transcending one's experience. This rising above the whole includes looking objectively at one's cultural/personal history, relating it and calibrating it to the present experiences with which one is struggling in the effort to gain self knowledge. Armed with this accurate self-concept, the individual is better able to move ahead toward the future course in life, to be fulfilled, to find self-actualization.

It is analogous to arriving at a junction in a road. Without a map or previous experience, we don't know the best route to our destination. Rising above the land would give us a broader view of the road system and we would be better able to make an informed decision. (Hanson-Zaiko, p. 47)

Finally, moving down the road in one's life is linked with one of the crucial ethical problems of self-concept. The maintaining of harmony among the various roles of life, for instance, all of them being quite legitimate roles, poses a very common but crucial dilemma. Having a healthy regard for the reality that every person has some center of ultimate concern which defines the magnetic center of our self, which gives us the organizing principle for all these various "callings," is essential for coping successfully with life's change and challenge. The task of bringing these diverse inner elements or roles into cooperative rather than competitive, contributive rather than exploitative, relation to each other is a major task of self-concept identification for every adult.

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